Fall 1990

Education, Autonomy, and Civic Virtue

Richard Dagger
University of Richmond, rdagger@richmond.edu

Article

EDUCATION, AUTONOMY AND CIVIC VIRTUE

Richard Dagger

Article Summary: *The major cause of our crisis in education is lack of agreement on the purpose of education. We can agree on what that purpose is, Richard Dagger argues, if we define it as the promotion of autonomy and civic virtue. Autonomy and civic virtue are often taken to be incompatible because one has to do with individual liberty and the other with collective responsibility. Dagger shows that the charge of incompatibility does not hold up under analysis. The two terms are, rather, complementary.*

Almost everyone agrees that we face an educational crisis in the United States today. There is less agreement, however, on the exact nature of the crisis and the proper response to it. This lack of agreement is itself significant, for the failure to agree on what we want our schools to do is largely responsible for the problems we now face. In the absence of such an agreement, we simply expect our schools to meet the demands of everyone vocal enough to make himself or herself heard. The result, according to John Chubb and Terry Moe, the authors of a recent and controversial book on America's schools, is that public schools "must make everyone happy by being all things to all people – just as politicians do (*Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, p. 54).

If this is so, then what is to be done? Logically, there are only two alternatives to the present condition. The first is to try to find or forge a consensus on the proper purpose of education, then direct our schools to pursue that purpose. The second, abandoning hope of achieving this consensus, is to allow schools to define their own purposes by encouraging competition between a variety of schools pursuing a variety of goals. This is the point of the so-called *choice* approach advocated most recently by Chubb and Moe. As they see it, "schools have no immutable or transcendent purpose. What they are supposed to be doing depends on who controls them and what these controllers want them to do" (p. 30.) The solution, then, is to free individual schools to pursue whatever goals they deem appropriate, thereby freeing parents and students to choose the schools most congenial to their inclinations. Schools should have to compete for customers in the marketplace, in other words, and successful schools, like successful magazines, will find "their niche – a specialized segment of the market to which they can appeal and attract support" (p. 55).

There may be much to recommend this approach to education. It is only in its most extreme form, however, that educational "choice" escapes the need to arrive at some sort of agreement about the purpose of education. In Chubb and Moe's proposal, for instance, schools will have to meet certain standards – for teacher certification, graduation requirements, and nondiscrimination, among others – if they are to qualify for the public funds that follow students to the schools they and their parents choose. At some point, then, some public decision will have to be reached about what schools must and must not do. Even "voucher" proposals encounter this problem, for without some standards to determine what counts as an honest-to-goodness school, anyone who teaches anything could have a claim on the public funds supporting the vouchers. The only way to escape this difficulty is to adopt an extreme libertarian position and call for either anarchy or Robert Nozick's "minimal state," in which there will be neither public funding, nor public schools, nor any requirement that anyone see to the education of children.

Richard Dagger teaches in the department of Political Science at Arizona State University.

If we do not want to follow the market mentality all the way to anarchy or the minimal state, we shall have to face up to the task of forging an agreement on the purposes of education – or, more narrowly, of what we want our schools to do. This, to be sure, is no easy task in a society as diverse as ours; but neither is it an impossible one. There are educational goals, albeit quite general ones, on which we can and should agree. This is evident in the distinction we now draw implicitly between various specialized schools – business schools, dance schools, schools of broadcasting, and so on – and our schools *simpliciter*. The purpose of the latter is not to prepare people for a specific career or activity, but in some way to prepare them for life. There is a difference, in other words, between *training*, which is the business of the specialized school, and *education*, which is the business of the school as such.

These distinctions suggest that the task of reaching a consensus on the goals of our schools is not hopeless. Unfortunately, they do not take us very far toward accomplishing that task. One may doubt, for instance, that there is any great insight in the observation that the business of the school is to educate. Even if we add that the purpose of education is in some way to prepare people for life, we still have to reach agreement on what "preparing people for life" entails. Given the variety of views in this country about how life should be lived, it is not easy to see how this can be done. My suggestion, however, is that we ought to think of preparation for life in terms of autonomy and civic virtue.

It is often alleged that autonomy and civic virtue are competing, or even incompatible, goods. Any steps we take to promote autonomy will come at the expense of civic virtue, according to this view, and vice versa. To ask schools to promote both, then, is to ask the impossible. In this essay I argue that autonomy and civic virtue, properly understood, are not incompatible, but complementary goals. I further suggest that autonomy and civic virtue provide better goals for our schools and our children than the competitive model so often favored by civic and business leaders.

Autonomy and Civic Virtue: Complementary Goals

Autonomy and civic virtue are often taken to be incompatible with one another because one has to do with individual liberty, the other with collective responsibility. Autonomy requires people to look inward so that they may govern themselves, while civic virtue demands that they look outward and do what they can to promote the common good. The two concepts also seem to be at home in different traditions of political thought, or different forms of political discourse. Autonomy has been the concern of liberals, on this view, while civic virtue has occupied the attention of classical republicans and communitarians. Thus "autonomy" seems to be a key term in the "rights-talk" of liberal theorists, and "civic virtue" a key term in a different vocabulary that centers on virtue.

Autonomy and civic virtue are different from one another, of course; if they were identical, we presumably would have no need for one of the two concepts. But this hardly proves them to be incompatible goods. The connection between autonomy and liberalism, on the one hand, and civic virtue and republican or communitarian views, on the other, is not as strict or necessary as it may seem. Some liberal writers, such as John Stuart Mill and T.H. Green, seem to want to encourage civic virtue, even if they do not use the term. There are also writers of a republican bent, such as Rousseau, who are clearly concerned with what we now call autonomy. I do not believe, then, that we must consign autonomy and civic virtue to distinct and incommensurable political traditions or "discourses" as necessarily incompatible terms. On the contrary, I believe that the two concepts exercise considerable appeal today precisely because they indicate what is of value in these two, not altogether distinct, traditions of political thought. Rather than regard autonomy as a purely individualist notion and civic virtue as a collectivist or communitarian ideal, we should look to their union as part of what Charles Taylor has called *holist individualism*, "a trend of thought that is fully aware of the (ontological) social embedding of human agents, but at the same time prizes liberty and individual differences very highly" ("Cross Purposes," in Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, p. 163). With that in mind, let us now take a closer look at the concepts in question.

Autonomy as Self-Mastery

Because autonomy is something we may predicate of a number of things – nation-states, corporations, and sewer districts, among them – it is necessary to be clear that my concern here is with the autonomy of the individual person. This is particularly important in view of the tendency of some writers on education to use "autonomy" in the sense of a school's independence, or freedom from interference. There is nothing wrong with this usage, but it must not be confused with *personal autonomy*.

The starting point is much the same, however. Whether we are referring to persons, schools, or nation-states, the literal meaning of 'autonomy' is still self-rule, self-legislation, or self-government. The difficulty, of course, lies in determining what is involved in self-rule. But we may begin by noting that autonomy assumes a *self* that is *capable* of leading a self-governed life.

At the conceptual core of autonomy is the notion of a self as a distinct person. Someone who cannot distinguish himself or herself from others cannot possibly lead a self-governed life, for such a person cannot conceive of himself or herself as a person with a distinct identity; nor can someone who suffers from some form of multiple or divided personalities. Autonomy implies, then, some fairly strong sense of selfhood – a sense that we do not expect infants

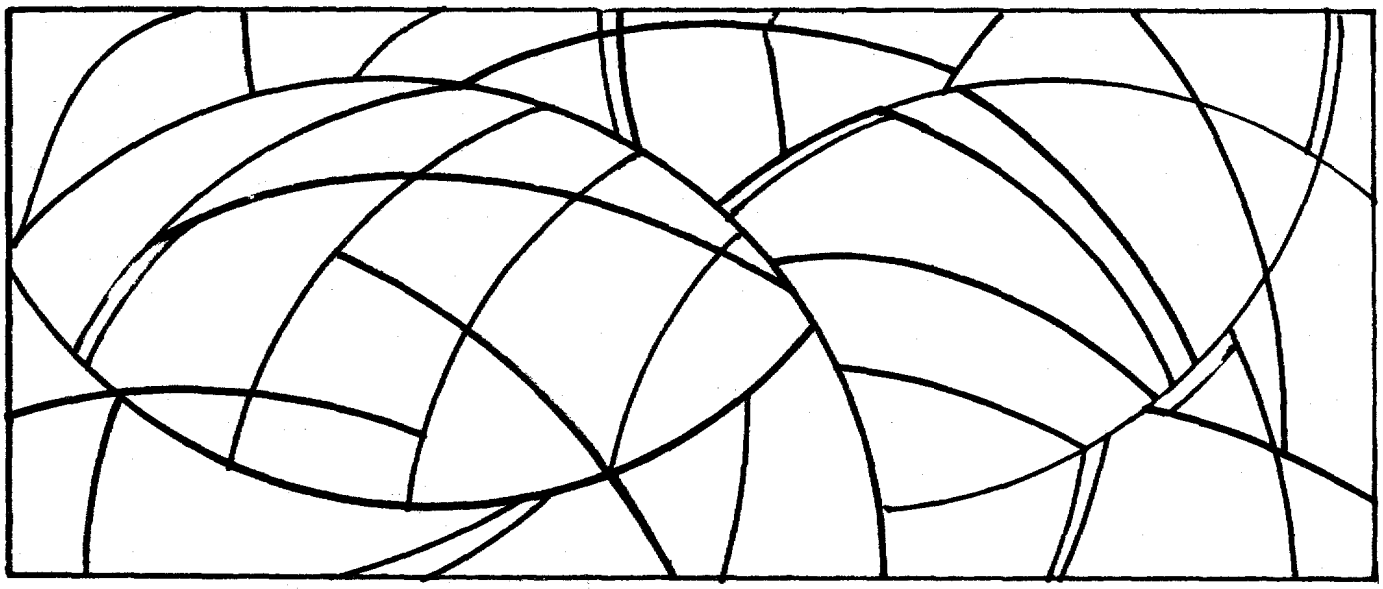
to possess, but that we usually hope children will develop as they mature.

If autonomy requires a fairly strong sense of self, it also requires that the self be capable of making choices. A person is self-legislating, *autonomous* rather than *heteronomous*, to the extent that she chooses the principles by which she lives. But if she truly *chooses* the principles that guide her conduct, the autonomous person must *be aware* of the alternatives from which she can choose. Someone who does the right thing instinctively, without reflection, in the manner of Melville's Billy Budd, may be a good and decent person, but not an autonomous one. Autonomy requires awareness: awareness of the choices open to us in life, and awareness also of our capacity to choose. If we can lead self-governed lives, then, it is because we are able to think of ourselves as more than objects at the mercy of forces over which we have no control, like so many leaves tossed about by the wind.

Because these forces may be internal as well as external, autonomy is sometimes regarded as *self-mastery*. This raises interesting and difficult problems, for it may be taken to mean that the self is not a single thing — or even that a person consists of more than one self. Sometimes people speak of a "lower" or "base" self, which leads us into temptation, and to which they oppose a "higher" or "true" self that struggles to keep us on the straight and narrow path. The autonomous person, on this view, is the one who achieves self-mastery by suppressing the impulses of the lower self in order to follow the inclinations of the higher.

To think in this way, however, is to misconceive autonomy. It misconceives autonomy because it leads to self-denial, perhaps even self-destruction. On this view, in other words, self-mastery is much like the relationship between master and slave, with the higher self, usually conceived to be reason or soul, called upon to exercise strict control over the lower, usually understood as appetite or flesh. But appetite or flesh, with all its insistent impulses, is natural to human beings, so the attempt to rise above and master it — and thus to divorce the "true" self from that "lower" self rooted in nature — is necessarily a form of self-denial. If we accomplish this denial, what is left? Pure reason or soul, all form and no content.

What is the alternative? Do we want to say that the person who acts on every fleeting impulse is autonomous? No, for there is a point to the distinction between



autonomy and heteronomy; but it is a point that can be captured in a conception of autonomy that does not require a divided, contentious self. If the model of a heteronomous person is a creature of impulse, incapable of deferring gratification or exercising any control over his or her appetites, the model of the autonomous person is one who knows these appetites and inclinations (among other things) well enough to bring them into harmony, and thus to achieve integrity through their integration. This comes closer to self-realization than to self-denial. If it involves self-mastery, it is the craftsman's mastery of a craft — the mastery of an orchestra conductor, for instance, or of the football quarterback who directs his teammates toward their goal — and not the mastery of the slaveowner. If autonomy is self-mastery, in short, it is mastery *of* self, not mastery *over* self.

Civic Virtue and Citizenship

Unlike personal autonomy, which relates to the abstract notion of the self, civic virtue refers to a particular role that a person may occupy – the role of *citizen*. Someone exhibits civic virtue, that is, when he or she does what a citizen is supposed to do. In this respect civic virtue is like the other virtues, which typically related to the performance of some role or the exercise of a certain skill.

Our concept of virtue derives from the Greek *arete*, or excellence, by way of the Latin *virtus*, which carried from its association with *vir* (man) the additional connotations of strength and boldness. To be virtuous, then, was to exhibit excellence in a particular skill or craft, or to perform admirably in a particular role or occupation. It was also possible to display a more general form of virtue by manifesting to a high degree the qualities of a good person. This was (and is) possible, however, only when there was (and is) some fairly clear notion of what a person is supposed to be. Personhood, in other words, must be conceived as a role that one may play, complete with criteria for determining when one is playing the role properly. In this sense a virtuous person is like a virtuoso musician, someone who does with great skill what a musician is supposed to do.

This suggests that there is a conceptual connection between the ideas of virtue and of good. Just as it would be absurd to say that Jones is a virtuoso pianist, but not a good one, so it would be absurd to say that Smith is a virtuous person, but not a good one. Such a connection does not hold between the ideas of autonomy and of good. We may think that autonomy itself is good, but we need not contradict ourselves when we say that Adams is an autonomous person, but not, all things considered, a good one.

As a role-related concept, then, virtue refers to the disposition to act in accordance with the standards and expectations that define the role or roles a person performs. The more specific the role, the more specific the virtues associated with it will be. A steady hand may be among the virtues of a carpenter and a surgeon, for instance, but not of an accountant or poet. There are some character traits or dispositions that seem useful to almost everyone, however, and these are what we sometimes think of as "the virtues" – including the classical virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, or a sense of proportion. These are virtues – along with honesty, loyalty, compassion, and others – not so much because they work to the advantage of the person who possesses them, but because they work to the advantage of the people with whom he or she associates. Virtues are valuable because they promote the good of the community or society, not because they directly promote the good of the individual person. This may be why chastity, which no longer seems so vital to the welfare of society, may be less widely regarded as a virtue than once it was.

To be virtuous, then, is to perform well a socially necessary or important role. This does not mean that the virtuous person must always go along with the prevailing views or attitudes. On the contrary, Socrates and John Stuart Mill have persuaded many people to believe that questioning and opposing the prevailing views are among the highest forms of virtue. In making this case, however, they rely on the claim that the social gadfly and the unorthodox thinker are really promoting the long-run interests of society – and thereby performing a social role of exceptional value.

Even if it might be shown that some virtues have no social value at all, it is clear that *civic virtue* will not be among them. Civic virtue simply *is* the disposition to do what is best for one's community, and to do it even – or especially – when one's private interest seems to point in a different direction. Understood in this way, civic virtue was a key concept of the classical republicans, and it survives today in the exhortations to do one's civic duty that regularly appear at election time. The fear of corruption and conflicts of interest also betray its traces. There are signs of a revival of a more straightforward appeal to civic virtue in the writings of various republican or communitarian theorists, of course, and even some who identify themselves with liberalism are showing an open interest in civic virtue of some sort. So there is reason to believe that a brief examination of the classical republicans' conception of civic virtue is worthwhile.

There appear to be three basic elements in civic virtue as the classical republican writers understood it. The first is the fear of *corruption*. Corruption is the opposite of virtue, for it consists in shirking one's duty as a citizen. This could take the passive form of neglecting one's civic duties in favor of one's personal pleasures, such as indolence or the pursuit of luxury; or it could take the active form of advancing one's personal interests at the expense of the common good. This was most likely to happen when ambition and avarice, the desire for power and wealth, would tempt a citizen to overthrow the rule of law and install a tyranny in its place.

The second key ingredient in the classical republicans' conception of civic virtue is fear of *dependence*. They regarded the citizen, following Aristotle, as someone who rules and is ruled in turn. The person who is completely dependent on another may be ruled, but is in no position to rule. The rule of law is essential, therefore, as a means of avoiding personal dependence. In a government of laws, not of men, the citizen is subject to the laws, not to the demands and whims of rulers who act without restraint. The republicans also typically defended private property as a way of guaranteeing that the citizen would not be dependent on others for his livelihood. Some, notably James Harrington and Rousseau, went further, suggesting that private property should be maintained, but distributed in such a way as to prevent anyone from being so wealthy as to render other citizens dependent. As Rousseau put the point in the *Social Contract* (Book I,

Chapter 9), everyone should have something, but no one too much.

The fear of dependence indicates, finally, the importance of *independence*, or *liberty*, in the republicans' conception of civic virtue. The virtuous citizen must be free, but not simply free to go his own way. This may be a form of freedom, but it is not a form of citizenship as they understood it. The citizen is free, they held, when he participates in the government of his community. As part of the community, the citizen will recognize that the government of common affairs is more or less directly *self*-government. If it requires the occasional sacrifice of one's personal interests, so be it; for this is necessary not only in the name of civic duty, but also in order to enjoy the rights and liberties of the citizen in a self-governing polity.

This, then, is what civic virtue was – and what it still is, according to those theorists who want to revive the republican spirit in contemporary politics. The question we must now consider is whether the revival of civic virtue is compatible with the desire for personal autonomy. I believe that it is. More than that, I believe that the three elements of the classical republicans' conception of civic virtue can help us see how the two may effectively complement one another.

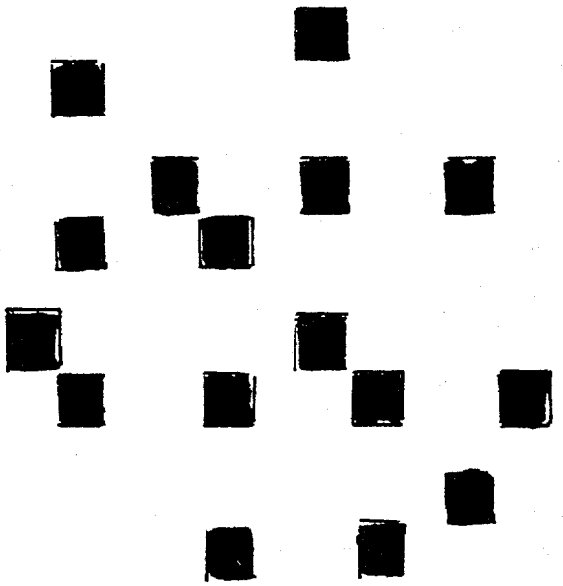
Personal Autonomy and Civic Virtue

The autonomous person chooses the principles by which he or she will live, which implies some degree of critical reflection on the principles available. With civic virtue, however, the emphasis is not on choice, but on acting, perhaps without reflection, to promote the common good. The unquestioning soldier who makes the "ultimate sacrifice" for his or her country provides a good example. It is easy enough to see, then, how autonomy and civic virtue can seem to be at odds with one another, for it is certainly possible for someone to exhibit civic virtue without being autonomous, just as it is possible for an autonomous person to put his or her well-being above the interests of anyone or anything else.

But this is to say that personal autonomy and civic virtue are different from one another, not that they are incompatible. It is also possible that their differences are complementary. To be precise, it is possible that autonomy and civic virtue, properly understood, are related concepts that can and should complement one another. Another look at the three principal elements of the classical republicans' conception of civic virtue should begin to make this clear.

First, the republicans' fear of corruption is largely a fear of human weakness. Indolence and love of luxury, ambition and avarice – these vices constantly beckon people to forsake their civic duties and disregard the claims of the common good. The threat of corruption is graver at some times than others, they believed, but it is always a threat. To stave it off it is necessary to establish mixed government and the rule of law, perhaps even to rotate public offices among the citizenry and to prevent the concentration of wealth and property in the hands of a few. But these devices will never extirpate the threat, for it springs from selfish and ultimately self-defeating desires implanted in human nature. To hold them in check while directing people's attention and devotion to the common good is, therefore, to achieve a form of *self-mastery*. In this respect, civic virtue and autonomy have something in common.

This is true with regard to the second feature of civic virtue as well. In this case the republicans' distinction between dependence and independence has a direct counterpart in the distinction between heteronomy and autonomy. The connection is probably clearest in the works of Rousseau, a republican writer who inspired the philosopher most often identified with the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy – Immanuel Kant. Rousseau proclaims that the only way to overcome "dependence on men" – and thus to promote freedom – is



to rely on the impartial rule of law and the general will. The general will, moreover, is not some disembodied force that resides in the community as a whole. Instead, it is the will that every citizen has *as a citizen* – the will to act in the public interest because that is the one interest all citizens share *as citizens*. If the rule of law frees people from their dependence on others, then, they will be free to make laws in accordance with the general will that each one shares. This, as Rousseau puts it in the *Social Contract* (Book I, Chapter 8), is "moral liberty," that is, living in accordance with laws that one makes for oneself. Another name for this is autonomy.

The connection between autonomy and civic virtue is perhaps most obvious with regard to the third element of

civic virtue – the idea that liberty is participation in government, and therefore self-government. Since autonomy means "self-government," one might say that the concept of civic virtue entails a commitment to autonomy, in some sense of the word. Again, this commitment is probably clearest in Rousseau's writings. For Rousseau, in fact, it seems not only that civic virtue entails self-government, but that autonomy is possible only when civic virtue prevails. For unless the *general will of the citizen* takes precedence over the *particular will of the man,* in Rousseau's terms, no one can experience moral liberty.

From the perspective of the classical republican conception of civic virtue, in short, autonomy and civic virtue are far from incompatible ideals. The same result emerges from a further analysis of the concept of autonomy. To begin with, autonomy "has to be worked for," which leads Robert Young (*Personal Autonomy,* p. 9) and other philosophers to regard it as "a *character ideal* or *virtue.*" More to the point, autonomy is not something that one can achieve solely through individual effort. It has to be worked for, certainly, but it also has to be cultivated or developed. An infant may have the ability to lead a self-governed life within her, like a seed, but this ability must be nourished and developed by others before she can ever hope to be autonomous. Recognizing this, the autonomous person should also recognize a duty of some sort to those whose help has made and continues to make it possible for her to lead a reasonably self-governed life. In a country or community in which this help sometimes takes the form of more or less impersonal public assistance or cooperation, the corresponding duty is a civic duty. Thus the autonomous person has a reason to exhibit civic virtue, at least when the community as a whole plays a significant part in fostering personal autonomy.

Conclusion

Bringing an end to the educational crisis in the United States requires a clear sense of the purpose or purposes of education. We can agree on what that purpose is, I have said, if we define it broadly as the promotion of autonomy and civic virtue. With these goals in mind, we can begin to discuss more productively the particular steps that need to be taken to improve our schools. Autonomy and civic virtue will not tell us everything we need to know on these matters – they will not help us to choose between phonics and its rivals as a method of teaching reading, for instance – but they can provide points of orientation from which people of diverse views can take their bearings.

Now I want to conclude by indicating why I believe my approach is superior to what seems, judging from the statements of civic and business leaders, to be its chief rival – the view that the purpose of education is to prepare our children, and thus our country, for economic competition. There are three reasons why I think it is better to take autonomy and civic virtue as our goals. The first is that an education for autonomy and civic virtue will give as much time and attention to the basic skills as the competitive model, thus promising to accomplish what the competitive model wants to accomplish. Second, the approach I have defended is more comprehensive and accommodating than the competitive model. It can help to prepare children for competition, that is, but it will also give them a wider vision, thereby offering an opportunity for growth to those who decide, upon reflection, that the competitive life is not the life they want to lead. It should also prove valuable in helping students to become adaptable – a trait that is supposed to be increasingly important in a world of "career burnout" and rapid change.

Finally, the competitive model points in two undesirable directions. On the one hand, it encourages us to think of children as resources to be marshalled in the struggle to maintain our national economic strength. On the other, it leads children to see themselves as isolated individuals locked in competition with one another – competition for jobs, money, and status. Thus the competitive model points either in a collectivist or an intensely individualist direction. In the first case it devalues the individual, who becomes a mere resource; in the second it affords little hope of maintaining social bonds and loyalties. In the first case it denies autonomy; in the second, civic virtue. Neither of these is acceptable.

With autonomy and civic virtue, however, we have the basis for an education grounded in holist individualism. Such an education proceeds from the view that no one is a self-created person, yet almost everyone has the capacity to exercise a considerable degree of control over his or her life. This capacity ought to be developed, furthermore, for it is a vital part of a worthwhile life; and a society that encourages the development of this capacity deserves the support of those it helps in this way. Autonomy and civic virtue are not, on this view, incompatible goods, but two sides of the same conception of the relationship between individuals and the political order. □